Layer upon layer of identical bowler-hatted men stand to attention in rows like ‘infinitely repeating wallpaper’ [1]. The men at the front appear clean-shaven and sport shirts and ties under their long dark overcoats. Some carry briefcases, others umbrellas. They differ only in their blank, staring, sleepwalker, mannequin-like faces [2]. Their size diminishes with each successive layer and their features fade to grey stencil outlines. They hang in suspended animation against a pale lilac sky and drab, grey, red-roofed, terraced buildings—geometrically precise, meticulously exact, all straight lines and right angles. ‘Every window, every man, every shadow evenly spaced’ [3]. Despite their closeness the men pay no attention to each other. They are isolated, identity and individuality lost. The repetition and the regimentation emphasize the ordinariness of their everyday existence and the boring routine of their working lives, which are without joy and companionship. The closed curtains at every window may indicate that the occupants are still asleep, unaware or indifferent to the fate of these depressive drones as they make their way to their unimportant and irrelevant jobs—a metaphor for anonymous, bourgeois businessmen, which together with the painting’s title Golconda (a once mythically rich and opulent Indian city) becomes an indirect critique of capitalism. However, the artist totally rejects this interpretation insisting that ‘people look for symbolism in my work. There is none’ [4].
In 1953, Alexander Iolas, a Greek art dealer bought *Golconda* along with 11 other paintings from Magritte for 7500 FB [4]. Later he helped to form the Menil Collection, Houston, where the painting is now housed. *Golconda* is typical of Magritte’s surreal approach, depicting everyday images in a realistic and simple manner but with their significance radically altered in a Freudian dream-like way. He treats conventional reality as an illusion inviting us to contemplate the endless depths of ordinary things [5]. He ‘defamiliarises the familiar’ [6] building riddles out of reality, confronting us with illogicality in a way that is both contradictory and absurd.

René François Ghislain Magritte was born (1898) at Lessines, an industrial Belgian town, the eldest of three children to Leopold, a salesman, and Régina, a milliner [7]. His childhood was marked by frequent house moves, financial difficulties and his mother’s suicidal drowning after several failed attempts. He took painting classes from the age of 12 and later studied at the Académie des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (1916–18). After a year in the army, he married Georgette Berger, his childhood sweetheart and lifelong muse and took a job as a draughtsman at a wallpaper factory, followed by 3 years as a poster and advertisement designer. His first surreal oil painting *Le jockey perdu* (1926) was followed a year later by a poorly received exhibition in Brussels. He moved to Paris, where he met André Breton, the founder of the surrealist movement [7]. However, he achieved little success and returned to Brussels (1930) to set up an advertising agency with his brother Paul. Meanwhile, he continued to question the nature of reality with works that were sometimes violent and often disturbing [8] exhibiting in New York (1936) and London (1938) [9]. During World War II, he remained in Brussels painting in an impressionist style (‘Surrealism in Full Sunlight’) while occasionally forging art works (Picasso, Braque and Chirico) and banknotes. At war’s end, he had a brief flirtation with Fauvism (période vache) before returning to his surreal style. His output gradually tailed off with age, tending towards favourite themes as in the two fresco cycles: *The Enchanted Realm* for the Knokke-le-Zut casino (1953) and *The Ignorant Fairy* for the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Charleroi (1957). In his last years, Magritte made bronze sculpture copies of some of his earlier paintings [8]. He died of pancreatic cancer on 15 August 1967 in his own bed and was buried in Schaerbeek Cemetery, Brussels.

Magritte’s work has greatly influenced the world of advertising, designs for paperbacks [10], album covers, record labels, films and songs [11] as well as pop artists such as Warhol, Lichtenstein and Blake. Meanwhile, ‘surreal’ has become common parlance and has been used to describe the dream-like quality of traumatic experiences [12]. The reactions to such events have attracted much lay and medical attention in an attempt to recognize, understand and ameliorate the potentially harmful long-term effects. Pre-employment selection and training [13] together with simple, pragmatic and sympathetic support as a first-line response [14] seem to be achieving some success. Would Magritte’s art have suffered if he’d been ‘counselled’ after his mother’s suicide [15]? What a surreal thought.

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**References**